While growing up in the English town of East Grinstead, LIZ BYRSKI would regularly see severely burned World War II veterans walking along the streets. She returned to her hometown to search out the stories of these men and the women who cared for them for her new book, *In Love and War: Nursing heroes*. She tells ANGUS DALTON what she found.

Liz Byrski was plagued by nightmares. Visions of monsters with mutilated faces; horrifying men who brought war and danger to her doorstep; scared warriors with thunderous lungs who hid in the shadows, waiting to leap out and terrify her at every corner. It sounds like the feverish imaginings of an anxious child. But these men are very real. They’re called the Guinea Pigs.

Liz grew up in East Grinstead, a small town 43 km south of London. It became a haven during World War II for the men of the Royal Air Force (RAF) who had been severely burned in aerial skirmishes with German fighters and bombers. The design of the Hurricane and Spitfire planes flown by the RAF caused the fuel tanks to explode in the pilots’ faces when hit by enemy fire, instantly turning the cockpit into a flesh-melting cauldron. The blue flames stripped the men’s faces of skin with the ferocity of a blowtorch and in many cases burned their hands down to charcoal stumps while they hurled earthwards.

Many of these men survived. But they returned home mutilated and unrecognisable. If it wasn’t for the work of pioneering surgeon Archibald McIndoe, who established a dedicated recuperation ward for the RAF flyers at East Grinstead, these men would have been left disfigured and alienated for the rest of their lives. He also encouraged the founding of The Guinea Pig Club, a support network that started the morning after a particularly enthusiastic night out, when a group of worse-for-wear RAF patients cracked open a hair-of-the-dog bottle of sherry. Passing round the bottle, they agreed to establish a regular burns victims’ “grogging club” with the New Zealand-born McIndoe as their president. What began with a hangover resulted in one of the largest war support networks in Britain. Their only eligibility criteria: you had to be a member of the RAF who had been “mashed, fried, or boiled” during service.

“The town was very important,” Liz tells me from her home near Perth. “It was a therapeutic community that McIndoe set up where it was safe for the disfigured men to walk up the street and know that they wouldn’t be laughed at or have kids throw stones at them. It was an extraordinary thing he did for those guys. Not just the surgery, but believing that while he could repair their faces, it took something more to repair their spirit.”

Liz grew up too young to understand that the terrifying faces in the street with warped noses and missing eyes were in fact former dashing young heroes of war. She’s had flashbacks to those faces all her life. But accompanying the terror was a growing curiosity: what is life like for those men still alive? What was the experience of the nurses who treated them? In *Love and War: Nursing heroes* is a product of years of research and a five-month stay in East Grinstead, where she went in search of the remaining Guinea Pigs and the nurses who had so painstakingly built up their lost confidence.

Ward III was the wing of Queen Victoria Hospital presided over by Archibald McIndoe (known as ‘Archie’ to the Guinea Pigs), where the injured flyers recuperated after their operations. Between 30 and 50 procedures were needed for each man to repair his face and hands. Every operation was an experiment—hence the darkly humorous name of the club—and no-one was as ambitious in their facial-reconstruction techniques as McIndoe. The best alternative before McIndoe’s innovations was a cold copper mask, moulded to the patient’s face as a cover-up rather than a treatment.

In contrast to the stark hush of the rest of the hospital, Ward III was buzzing with music, flowing with beer, and rife with unabashed canoodling. Liz rattles off a list of tasks that the frantic nurses were expected to complete in a day—the agonising changing of burn dressings, helping the men into saline baths, feeding them, reading to them, sterilising equipment and washing them.

“All those normal nursing tasks, plus they were working in this highly sexualised atmosphere—lots of joking and teasing and high spirits. It was so unconventional. Nurses were trying to get professional status for their work. Part of that was keeping distance from your patients. But McIndoe dissolved all those boundaries. He was very happy for nurses and patients to get together. That’s what set up the difficult situation for the nurses.’

Liz says that if she had met McIndoe, who died in 1960, she would have asked if he ever considered what it was like for those nurses who worked so tirelessly to repair these men psychologically as well as physically, while dodging the persistent advances and flirtatious pranks played by their patients. Too often tellings of the Guinea Pig Club story gloss over the essential contribution the nurses made to the recovery of these men, but Liz is determined to rectify this oversight with her book. Fittingly, she dedicated her book to ‘the women who nursed, loved, married and danced with the Guinea Pigs’.

But what effect did completing this years-long project have on Liz?

“There’s a smile in her voice when she answers. The nightmares have gone.

In *Love and War: Nursing heroes* by Liz Byrski is published by Fremantle Press, rrp $27.99.
In the aftermath of the Battle of Britain, badly burnt airmen filled the childhood town of bestselling novelist Liz Byrski. Returning to confront her memories, Byrski uncovers the secret history of the nurses who brought our men back to life.

PRAISE FOR LIZ BYRSKI

"... an extraordinary true story which reverberates with the power of love." The Sunday Times

"A moving story marked out with pin-sharp memories and tightly reined prose." The Age

"A beautiful story that needed to be written." The West Australian